Comments on Ballroom Addition to the White House

Submitted to the National Capital Planning Commission

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The proposed White House ballroom presents both opportunities and concerns that merit careful consideration by the NCPC. While I appreciate certain aspects of the architectural approach, several fundamental issues require examination before approval.

Architectural Approach: Roofline Consistency

The decision to maintain the roofline consistent with the existing White House is commendable. This approach preserves the building's scale and creates a unified complex, particularly if the West Wing eventually receives similar treatment. This design principle demonstrates respect for the historic character of the White House complex.

Scale Concerns: Unprecedented Size

The proposed scale raises significant questions about appropriateness and necessity. For context:

- Buckingham Palace Ballroom: 170 guests maximum capacity
- White House State Dining Room: 140 guests
- White House East Room: 200 guests
- Proposed White House ballroom: 900–1,000 guests (5–6 times larger than comparable diplomatic venues)

All G7 countries successfully conduct state dinners in venues of 150–200 guests. These intimate settings facilitate the actual diplomatic conversations and relationship-building that are the purpose of such events. A ballroom of 400–500 capacity would still represent a significant expansion while maintaining the diplomatic character appropriate for state functions. The proposed 900–1,000 capacity more closely resembles a political convention center than a diplomatic reception hall.

Access and Life Safety Deficiencies

Egress and accessibility appear seriously deficient in the current plans:

- The lack of ADA-compliant access on the east side (Treasury building side) represents a significant oversight that must be rectified. This is not merely a technical requirement but a fundamental matter of equal access to the People's House.
- For a venue designed to hold 900+ people, the emergency egress routes appear insufficient based on the submitted plans.

- The NCPC should require detailed life safety plans, including emergency egress capacity calculations and ADA compliance documentation, before approval.

Entrance and Security Infrastructure

The commissioners correctly identified the need for a comprehensive plan for attendee entrances and security screening. This issue must be addressed as part of this project, not deferred. The current practice of temporary tents and ad-hoc structures:

- Creates ongoing security vulnerabilities that are unacceptable for a facility of this importance
- Presents an unprofessional appearance unworthy of the nation's capital and the diplomatic functions supposedly being served
- Causes repeated damage to White House grounds through installation and removal cycles

A permanent, purpose-built entrance and security screening facility should be required as an integral component of this project. The past practice of piecemeal additions has been inadequate. The NCPC should insist on a comprehensive solution now.

Long-Term Operational and Ethical Implications

While the NCPC's primary focus is planning and design, the long-term operational implications directly impact the public interest and should inform the commission's review:

Ongoing Federal Costs

- Significant expansion of White House residence staff will be required for a 90,000 square foot facility—the current residence employs approximately 95 staff for 55,000 square feet
- Substantial increase in Secret Service personnel and security infrastructure to protect a venue of this unprecedented scale
- Annual maintenance, utilities, and operational costs that will persist in perpetuity, despite the structure being privately funded for construction only

The Government Accountability Office has repeatedly warned that donor-funded construction at federal facilities creates long-term federal obligations without corresponding funding. This pattern, evident in Smithsonian expansions where operating costs far exceeded projections, should not be replicated at the White House without full disclosure of anticipated ongoing federal costs.

Hatch Act Concerns

The dramatic departure from traditional state dinner venue size raises legitimate questions about intended use:

- A venue 5–6 times larger than traditional state dinner halls appears designed for political events rather than diplomatic functions

- The proposed capacity (900–1,000) mirrors political convention centers and campaign event venues, not diplomatic reception halls used by peer nations
- While the President is exempt from the Hatch Act, federal employees who staff and maintain this facility are not—clear operational guidelines must be established to prevent misuse of this public resource for partisan political purposes

These concerns are not speculative. The 2020 Republican National Convention's use of White House facilities generated widespread ethical concerns and multiple Hatch Act violations by federal employees. A purpose-built venue of this scale could institutionalize such practices.

Recommendations to the NCPC

The NCPC should:

1. Require specific justification for the unprecedented scale (900–1,000 capacity versus traditional 150–200), including documentation of the frequency and nature of events that genuinely require such capacity
2. Mandate comprehensive ADA accessibility and life safety plans, including detailed emergency egress calculations for the proposed occupancy
3. Require permanent entrance and security screening facilities as an integral part of this project submission, with detailed plans for visitor processing capacity
4. Request disclosure of projected long-term federal operational costs and establishment of clear usage guidelines to protect against misuse of public resources for partisan political purposes

Conclusion

The White House belongs to all Americans. The NCPC has a responsibility to ensure this expansion serves diplomatic purposes proportionate to genuine need, not political ambitions disproportionate to historical precedent. A more modest expansion—in the range of 400–500 capacity—would still represent a substantial improvement over current facilities while maintaining the character appropriate for the People's House.

I urge the Commission to exercise its oversight authority thoughtfully and to insist on answers to these fundamental questions before approving a project of this magnitude and consequence.

Respectfully submitted,

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